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*"Research for the Soldier"*



**A Special Foreign Activity of the  
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**and**

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**OFFICE OF THE CHIEF SURGEON**

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# STRATEGIES

*for*

## ***HEALTHY COPING WITH OPERATIONAL STRESS***



&

## **REUNION TIPS**

**OPERATION SUPPORT HOPE**

## FOREWORD

You have just participated in a very important humanitarian mission, bringing badly needed food, water and medicine to displaced Rwandan people. Through your efforts and those of your fellow soldiers, many people will now live, who otherwise would surely have died. Your work has saved lives.

On this mission you may have witnessed a level of human suffering unusual in the experience of most Americans. This short brochure was written in order to provide soldiers like yourself with some tips for making the return go smoother, and to help you take positive lessons from this deployment. Despite the many sad events in Rwanda, it is important to focus on the good that was accomplished through Operation Support Hope. There are some simple steps you can follow to insure that your experiences on Operation Support Hope will be a force for positive growth and health in your life.

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## **1. REMEMBER: NEGATIVE REACTIONS AND MEMORIES ARE NORMAL**

As a humanitarian mission, Operation Support Hope put our soldiers into close contact with tremendous suffering, illness and death. It is normal and natural to be somewhat saddened and even shocked by what you have seen. Images and memories of the sights, smells and sounds you encountered may well stick with you for some time to come. You may even find your sleeping and eating patterns are a little "out of whack". It is important to remember there is nothing wrong with you; these are normal, healthy human reactions. Over time, these images and symptoms should fade. In the short term, some people find the expert advice of a doctor or mental health professional can help. Always keep in mind your reactions are normal, and that through your efforts the lives of many people were saved and made better.

## **2. TAKE TIME TO "DEBRIEF"**

In the same way it is important to continue taking certain medications to prevent getting infected with malaria and other diseases, it's also important not to let disturbing images or memories disrupt your life in the future. The best "prophylaxis" or prevention against stress-related problems is to take some time now to discuss your experiences on the deployment with trusted friends or fellow soldiers. Your unit leaders can help in setting up an after-action debriefing. The focus of this debriefing is on events. Each soldier in the debriefing session has the opportunity to describe his/her own experiences from the time of the deployment to the present. This helps soldiers gain a more accurate and healthy perspective on events that occurred throughout the mission. It is also a good way to correct misperceptions about events, and can provide leaders and soldiers alike with useful "lessons-learned" that can be applied on future operations.

### **3. USE SELF & BUDDY AID**

Just as on the battlefield, the "first-line" of defense against serious injury and illness is self & buddy aid. An important part of self & buddy aid is to know when to ask for help. Pay attention to yourself and soldiers that deployed with you, and don't hesitate to get assistance if memories or symptoms seem too much to bear or are just not getting better with time. This is not weakness or "snivelling", it is taking care of your health and spirit so you will be in peak fitness for the next mission.

### **4. USE MILITARY HEALTH CARE & COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

You should be aware that there are more unit and community resources to support you and other soldiers with healthy coping strategies. Army chaplains are a great resource, highly experienced and accessible. Nearly every community has an Army Community Services (ACS) office, with dedicated professionals whose mission is to support soldiers and their families. If they don't have what you need, they can help you find it. The Army health care system includes social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists who can help in keeping the coping process on a positive track. The most important thing is to be proactive and get some assistance from your community if you feel it would help.

## AFTERWORD

*There is no denying that humanitarian operations like Support Hope can be very stressful for those who provide assistance. Studies of disaster workers and helpers show that stress levels for helpers is high, and can sometimes lead to health problems. But research also shows that the long-term effects for helpers in disasters can be positive. By taking the right steps now, you can keep yourself healthy and avoid negative effects. Your participation in Operation Support Hope is something to be proud of, and something that should be remembered as a positive learning experience in your life.*



## HOMECOMING AFTER DEPLOYMENT

Following are some tips for making the return home go smoothly. Although written mainly for soldiers with families, there are a few good tips here for single soldiers as well.

## DEALING WITH CHANGES AND EXPECTATIONS

With deployments come change. Knowing what to expect and how to deal with changes can make reunion more enjoyable and less stressful. Below are some hints you might find helpful.

### EXPECTATIONS FOR SOLDIERS:

- You may want to talk about what you saw and did. Others may seem not to want to listen. Or you may not want to talk about it when others keep asking.
- You may miss the excitement of the deployment for a while.
- Some things may have changed while you were gone.
- Roles may have changed to manage basic household chores.
- Face-to-face communication may be hard at first.
- Sexual closeness may also be awkward at first.
- Children have grown and may be different in many ways.
- Spouses may have become more independent and learned new coping skills.
- Spouses may have new friends and support systems.
- You may have changed in your outlook and priorities in life.

## EXPECTATIONS FOR SPOUSES:

- Soldiers may have changed.
- Soldiers used to the open spaces of the field may feel closed in.
- Soldiers also may be overwhelmed by noise and confusion of home life.
- Soldiers may be on a different schedule of sleeping and eating (jet lag).
- Soldiers may wonder if they still fit into the family.
- Soldiers may want to take back all the responsibilities they had before they left.
- Soldiers may feel hurt when young children are slow to hug them.

## WHAT CHILDREN MAY FEEL:

- Babies less than 1 year old may not know you and may cry when held.
- Toddlers (1-3 yrs) may hide from you and be slow to come to you.
- Preschoolers (3-5 yrs) may feel guilty over the separation and be scared.
- School age (6-12 yrs) may want a lot of your time and attention.
- Teen-agers (13-18 yrs) may be moody and may appear not to care.
- Any age may feel guilty about not living up to your standards.
- Some may fear your return ("Wait until mommy/daddy gets home!").
- Some may feel torn by loyalties to the spouse who remained.

## **TIPS FOR REUNION**

Reunion is a part of the deployment cycle and is filled with joy and stress. The following tips can help you have the best possible reunion.

### **TIPS FOR SOLDIERS:**

- Support good things your family has done.
- Take time to talk with your spouse and children.
- Make individual time for each child and your spouse.
- Go slowly when re-establishing your place in the family.
- Be prepared to make some adjustments.
- Make your savings last longer.
- Take time to listen and talk to loved ones.
- Go easy on the partying.

### **TIPS FOR SPOUSES FOR REUNION:**

- Avoid scheduling too many things.
- Go slowly in making adjustments.
- You and your soldier may need time for yourself.
- Remind soldier they're still needed in the family.
- Discuss splitting up family chores.
- Stick to your budget until you've had time to talk it through.
- Along with time for the family, make individual time to talk.
- Be patient with yourself and your partner.

### **TIPS FOR REUNION WITH CHILDREN:**

- Go slowly. Adapt to the rules and routines already in place.
- Learn from how your spouse manages the children.
- Be available to your child, both with time and with your emotions.
- Let the child set the pace for getting to know you again.
- Delay making changes in rules and routines for a few weeks.
- Expect the family will not be the same as before you left; everyone has changed.
- Focus on successes with your children; limit your criticisms.
- Encourage children to tell you about what happened during the separation.
- Make individual time for each child and your spouse.